

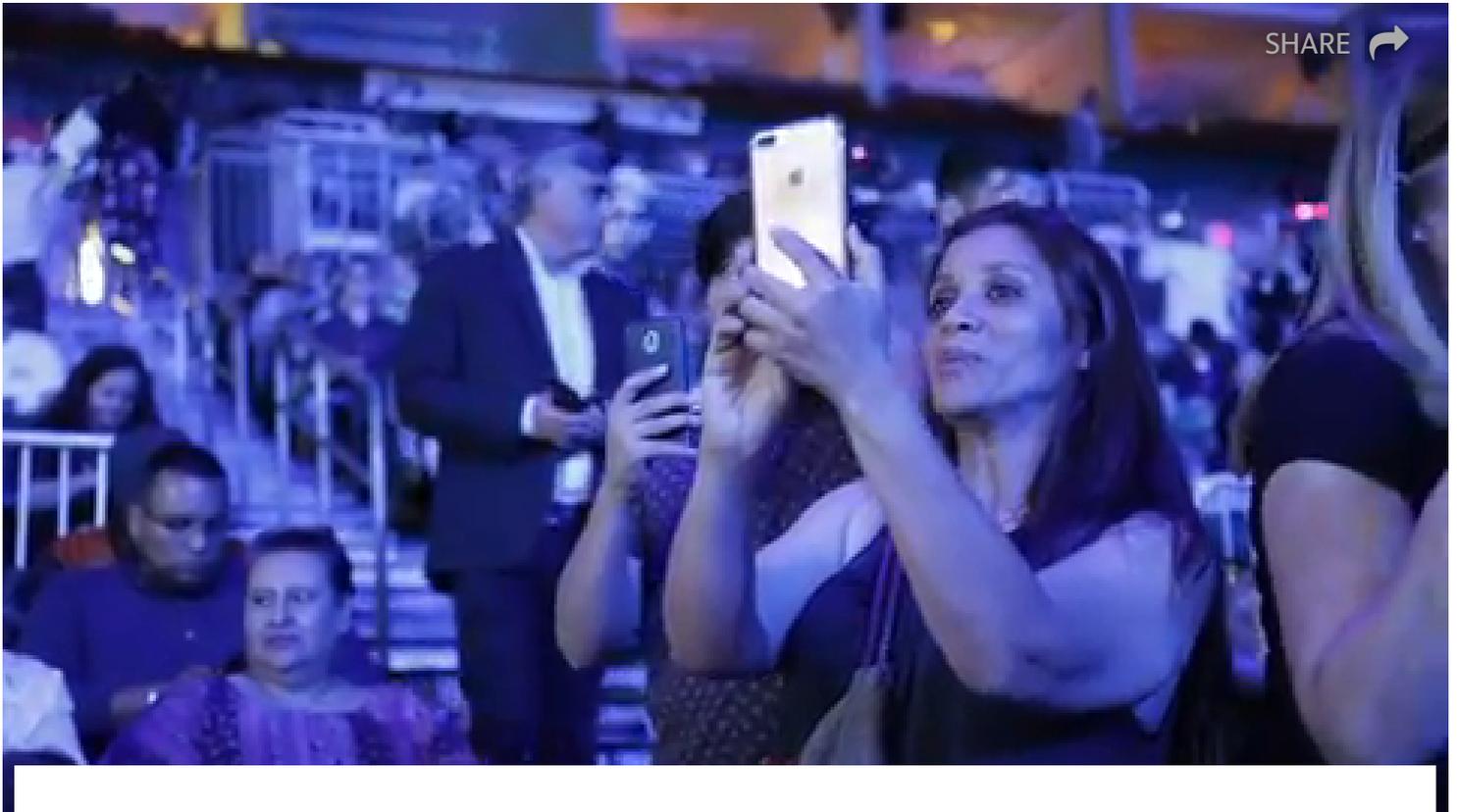


EDUCATION

MDC's Padrón celebrated by graduating class during 'bittersweet' send off

BY MARTIN VASSOLO

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To the uninitiated, the scene inside Coral Gables' Watsco Center on Saturday — pulsating reggaeton music, inflatable glow sticks and a standing ovation — could understandably be confused for a party, or maybe the Nicky Jam concert that was scheduled for American Airlines Arena later that night.

But once the opening music faded and the fog cleared, it became obvious that the crowd -- and the thousands of graduating Miami Dade College students -- weren't cheering on a musical act. They were clapping for their individual achievements, and for a man considered among his peers to be a rock star in his own right: outgoing MDC President Eduardo Padrón.

The hectic and "bittersweet" day marked the final graduation ceremonies Padrón would attend as the longtime leader of the award-winning college. In Coral Gables to see students from the Wolfson and Hialeah campuses graduate, Padrón spent the day traveling to four other commencement ceremonies, basking in the warm reception and speaking with students he says inspire him everyday.

"It's been very emotional," he said in an interview prior to the 2 p.m. ceremony at the Watsco Center. "In every graduation up to this one, the students surprised me with incredible tributes and wonderful statements of support and admiration, and it's something that touches my heart. I'm just very grateful for the opportunity that I have had to be here doing what I do. There is no better job in the world. To me this is not a job; this is my religion; this is my vocation; this is my sense of purpose."



Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, Miami Dade College President, who is retiring after 25 years as president speaks during the MDC's Hialeah and Wolfson Campuses Commencement Ceremony, at the Wastco Center in Coral Gables, on Saturday May 04, 2019. Pedro Portal PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Padrón, who joined the MDC faculty in 1970 and rose to the level of president in 1995, is considered among his peers as a champion for diversity and accessibility in academia and has been credited with elevating the college to the national prominence it now enjoys.

More than 13,000 students representing 192 nations graduated from MDC on Saturday, said Joaquin Martinez, president of the Wolfson and Hialeah campuses.

Saturday afternoon's commencement speaker, international business executive and former longtime White House trade policy advisor Solomon "Sol" Trujillo, took time out of his address to the graduating class of 2019 to congratulate and thank Padrón on his achievements, which include receiving the 2016 Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"I need to tell all of you that I've gotten to know Dr. Padrón over many years, not because I lived in Miami, not because I was in the educational field, but because he was legendary," said Trujillo,

unique anywhere in our country and maybe unique anywhere in our world.”

Trujillo, who said the love MDC students and faculty have for Padrón was palpable during the ceremony's opening, led the audience in a loud round of applause for the outgoing president, who will step down officially in August.



Miami Dade College student Ruth Castillo, a 58 years old woman graduating as social worker reacts as she gets a special recognition during the 2019 MDC's Hialeah and Wolfson Campuses Commencement Ceremony, the last one for President Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón who is retiring after 25 years as president at the UM Wastco Center in Coral Gables, on Saturday May 04, 2019. Pedro Portal PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Earlier in the commencement, the MDC staff screened a comical graduation-themed video that prominently featured Padrón's signature red glasses. In the skit, students across campus are nearly blinded by the pair of glasses, which the college's shark mascot carries around in a mysterious chest. At one point, before a woman led the crowd in "We are MDC!" chants, his glasses appeared on the large screens above the Watsco Center stage -- a symbol of his unique academic vision -- and the student body loudly cheered for their dedicated leader.

Padrón said before the ceremony that he was content to see his life's work bear such beautiful fruit. Throughout the county, he said, there is hardly a household that has not been affected in

Seeing the graduating class of students walk across the stage was satisfaction enough. But the applause certainly didn't hurt.

"This year is especially bittersweet for me," Padrón said. "I know it's the last one."

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